



Preparation & Recovery

The world of the modern AFL footballer has changed considerably in the past few years. The days of rocking up to training following a day's work as a labourer or office worker and then heading to the pub following a hard running session are long gone.

One of the most important aspects in the world of professional football is preparation and recovery.

THE BULLDOG talks to Head of Physical Performance Cameron Falloon and Sports Science Assistant Luke Meehan about what goes into looking after the fitness and recovery of the Western Bulldogs playing group.

Preparation

Screenings, taping, massage and treatments...

Come Monday morning following a game at the weekend and the various post-game recovery sessions, the medical and fitness staff gather to assess the playing group and manage the week ahead.

The players go through a full physical screening each week where the doctors, physiotherapists and myotherapists assess them. Following their assessment the results are analysed and the medical and fitness team work

together to finalise each player's week.

"The role of a footballer is almost a 24 hour a day job. Take nutrition for example. Players have to know exactly how many calories to put in to their bodies, they have to know what source the calories are coming from and they need to make sure the timing of nutrient intake is correct.

Quality sleep for the players is also critical for recovery. I will often get calls from players at various times of the day or night if they aren't feeling quite right and they want to know what to do and then how to do it," Falloon says.

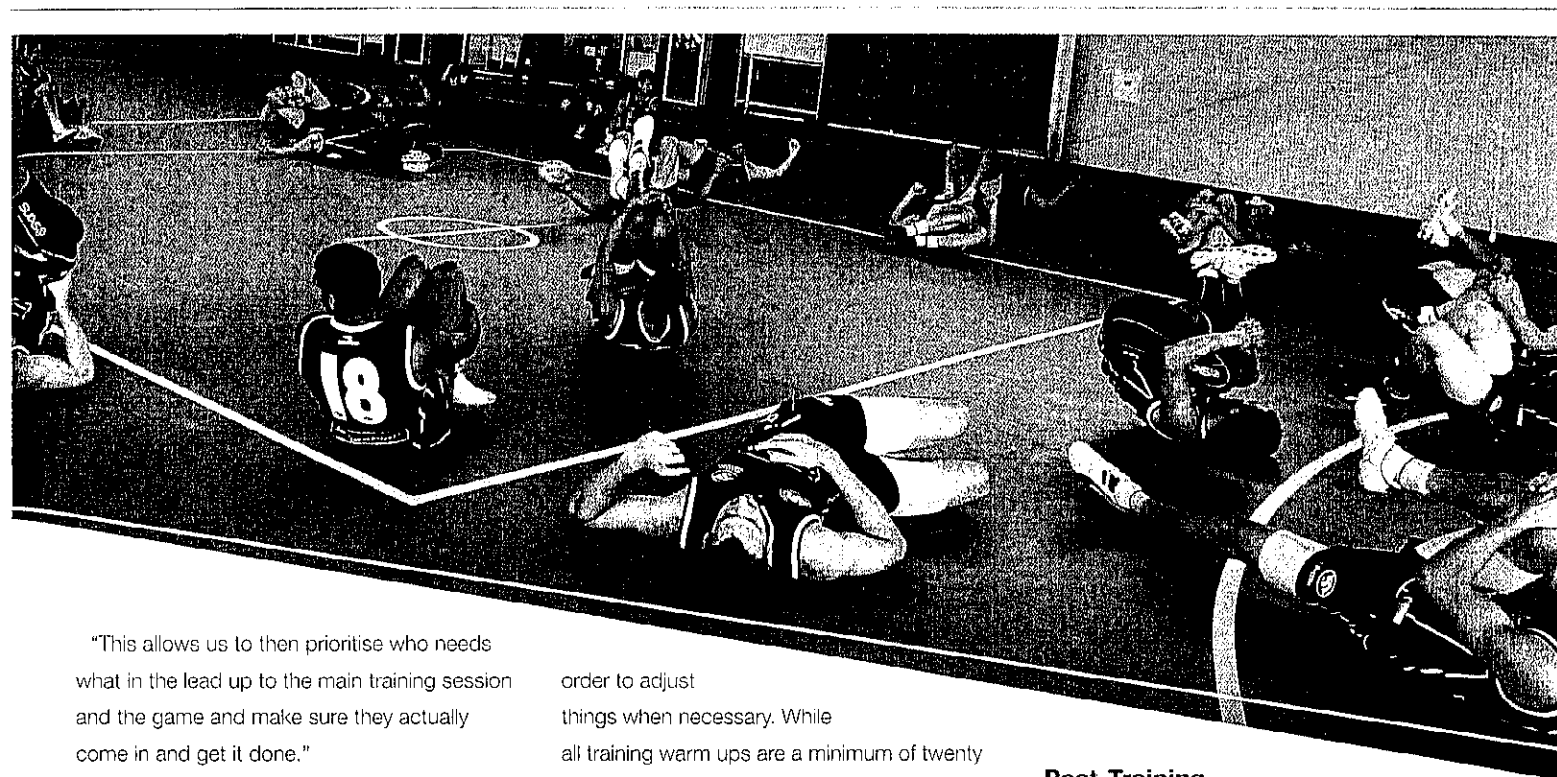
"We plan well in advance, right up to the end of the season, however each Monday we will change the programs dependant on the physical presentation of the playing group. The players will be assessed post game, at recovery the next day and then again on Monday. There are last minute calls on what training each player can do and how we need to fine-tune their program in order to get them up for the next match.

Then you have the guys who might have short-term injuries. Once scans or X-rays have been assessed we rely heavily on the clinical assessments of our medical team to determine how far we can push it with the player's fitness and strength programs whilst they are injured," Meehan says.

Some players will come out of the screening process and have little change to their routine however others will be given a schedule of what is required which may be vastly different to the week before. Often it is something minor that can be addressed in their strength programs.

"The physiotherapists will determine what the players need for the week following the assessment. One player might need four physio treatments while another might need one physio and three myotherapy sessions. Others need modification to their strength or fitness programs. It is very individual specific," Falloon says.





"This allows us to then prioritise who needs what in the lead up to the main training session and the game and make sure they actually come in and get it done."

The fitness staff must work with the physio's to ensure every part of the training program is in order.

"A player might need extra core work because the right side of his deep abdominal muscles are not working or they might need a glute program because they have poor glute hamstring timing. So we know all those things and are able to work out the appropriate time to move them on to the next level of training to ensure they don't lose their strength or fitness," Falloon says.

And what about all that strapping and taping we see on the players during the games and training sessions?

"All players must have their ankles taped whether they have had an ankle injury or not. The guys who have had shoulder issues or operations will always have their shoulder's taped, others might strap their back to give them support etc," Falloon explains.

"Some players will always strap the same body parts either through necessity or superstition while for others it is a week by week thing that they need extra taping. Every week things crop up that aren't major but are not the norm for that individual and therefore we must manage them to ensure they don't suffer an actual injury or are put at risk."

Training Preparation

The first thing players do upon arriving at the Club is weigh themselves and produce a urine sample as a way of assessing their level of hydration. After this, its treatments, strapping and meetings with coaches before the warm up begins.

Pre-training warm ups vary only slightly from day to day, however the fitness staff are always monitoring the group and the individuals in

order to adjust things when necessary. While all training warm ups are a minimum of twenty minutes, with some more than 30 minutes the players will also do a variety of exercises prior to joining together for the final warm up process.

"Before the main training session we do a series of tests that are indicators of where the players are at physically. They go through a range of power tests and we get information, which enables us to modify their program should we need to. They could be at the level we want them to be at or if they aren't it allows us to change things on the spot," Meehan says.

"The group warm up for each training is very different to what the players are required to do post training as it is a dynamic warm up. There is no static stretching involved and it is all about getting the players completely mobile, putting all of their muscles and joints through full range of motion so they can cope with the training session.

"All of the players have a set routine which is designed to increase their core temperature and get them warmed up. As well as the group warm up they also have an individual warm up they do as everyone has little things they like to do more than others. We guide them on that especially when they are young players however it's fairly consistent for everyone," Falloon says.

"We then take them through their warm up drills which is part of their conditioning program early in the week. For the main training session it is focused on getting them sharp to train well. Most of it is getting their muscles through full range and then depending on the type of session we will change the stimulus to pick them up or work with what they have coming up in the session."

Post-Training

Gone are the days of heading down to the pie shop after training or grabbing that pint. Nowadays footballers have strict guidelines of what is required post training.

"We have 45 minutes with the players post training in order to get them to recover correctly. I believe that recovery is the most important part of a player's conditioning in-season.

They have a recovery station with their *Powerade Recovery* drinks, which provide a unique formulation of carbohydrates, electrolytes and protein to provide fast and effective hydration and help speed up recovery, particularly after strenuous and intense workouts. The recovery station also contains *Musashi* protein bars and a variety of healthy snacks. They do some active cool down, which is really just walking and mobility work. Then they go through a range of stretches with a partner and stretch the whole body. Then they are





into the ice baths for a minimum of six minutes before heading into the medical team to be assessed. Most clubs are very close from a conditioning point of view. A lot of it comes down to recovery," Falloon says.

"We are lucky to have the support of sponsors such as *Powerade* who provide the Club with vital pre and post training hydration solutions. These products include the new *Powerade Energy Edge* which has been developed to give athletes an added pre-sport energy boost through its formulation of electrolytes, B vitamins and caffeine. The players preparation and recovery cannot be achieved without the correct nutritional supplements such as these," Falloon says.

WORLD CLASS TECHNOLOGY AND RESOURCES

The Western Bulldogs have a strong partnership with Victoria University who provide sports scientists and research services to the Club resulting in some of the most advanced technology and information being provided to the support staff.

"We have world-class people working with us from Victoria University who are at the top of their field. You can have as much information as you like but then you have to have the resources to apply that information. So we could have 20 GPS's on players at the weekend but unless you have the staff numbers to support it you can't analyse that amount of information in

the time it's needed. We are very lucky because of our relationship with Victoria University. They do a lot of it for us and they are always up with the latest information. Certainly other club's don't have that luxury so they only analyse four players at the weekend for example," Falloon says.

GAME DAY

It's game day. Everything done during the week thus far goes onto the back burner as the support staff work on getting the players up and ready to go for the big game.

PRE-GAME

"Pre-game there is more a time for the players to do their own thing. Some like to listen to their Ipod and sit and relax, others like to get on the ground and take in the atmosphere while some like to do boxing drills beforehand because it gets them "up". Sometimes they come to you and say I'm feeling this way what should I do so you get them doing something different to normal. Most of the time though its all about superstition and following a routine," Falloon and Meehan say.

"When it comes to the actual warm up its pretty similar to pre-training, ensuring they are warm and getting into their mobility routine for about ten minutes. Once that's done we head outside and things then get a bit different as there is no conditioning aspect at all. Its about getting them warm and switched on ready for some skill work.

90% of it is the same every week and the remaining 10% is about getting a feel for the group's mood. Sometimes they might be quiet or nervous and you need to stimulate them or you might need to calm them down if they are edgy and up. It's all about getting them ready to go when the ball bounces," the pair said.

"We play at ten different venues so sometimes the space and rooms are different, plus depending on things such as entertainment on the ground pre-game, the heat, humidity, the rain and so forth. There are a lot of small factors you need to keep in mind," says Falloon.

Recovery – POST GAME

Following a game the players have 30 minutes to get their recovery done. If it doesn't happen within that time period a player may not recovery fully for the next week so no chances are taken as they come off the field.

"The first 30 minutes is a really critical window of opportunity. It's

about getting the right amount of protein and carbohydrates into them to start the recovery process. It's a big focus for us. The players weigh themselves and do a hydration test post-game and then dependent on the outcomes they come to us and then speak to Louise (dietician) to discuss what interventions need to be put in place.

Making sure all of the playing group are ticked off from a medical point of view following a game is extremely important. If there are any niggles, soreness or injuries we need to get on top of them early," Falloon says.

"The first thing they do is active cool down while getting their nutrition in, then the medical staff speak to them and screen everyone. Once everyone has been ticked off then it's into the actual cool down process.

You will notice as soon as the players return to the changerooms after a game that they will have their *Powerade Isotonic* or *Powerade Recovery* drinks in their hands. The players ability to replenish fluids, re-hydrate and recover after each match makes a considerable difference to their preparation for the following weeks training and game," Falloon says.

"We ice early – we call it shutdown – six minutes minimum for an ice bath or 15 minutes in the ocean. If they have micro damage to their muscles it can stop any extra bleeding and damage. Following a game or hard training session they aren't allowed to jump into a hot bath or spa as that could make them worse. It's all about rest, ice, compression, and nutrition," Falloon and Meehan say.

"Night games are the hardest to recover from as you lose sleep and it's hard for them to eat a big meal because its midnight by the time they leave the ground. I think they have improved dramatically probably because we have forced them to do it as it is so important."

The players also take advantage of a partnership with *Skins* in order to assist with their recovery as the products assist reducing the build-up of lactic acid immediately after periods of sustained exercise and allows for more rapid return to normal levels. Athletes experience less fatigue, minimise soreness and recover faster.

"The players wear *Skins* for training and some also wear for the games. We require the players to wear the *Skins* when we travel interstate as they assist with recovery and help when flying." ■

